DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 121 764 SP 010 028

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TITLE The Contributions of German Turners to America's Exercise Expression: Then and Now.
PUB DATE [76]
NOTE 10p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS American History; *Athletics; *Educational History; Ethnic Groups; *Exercise (Physiology); *Immigrants; *Physical Education
IDENTIFIERS *Germans

ABSTRACT

The Turnverein movement in German schools in the early 19th century emphasized the importance of physical education. German immigrants brought this movement to the United States, establishing Turnverein societies in many American cities. They also prepared gymnastics teachers in normal schools and pushed legislation to make physical education mandatory in American schools. Although membership in Turner societies has since declined, Turner festivals, which feature athletic and cultural competitions, still exist. (CD)

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THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF GERMAN TURNERS TO AMERICA'S EXERCISE EXPRESSION: THEN AND NOW

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One of the most fascinating aspects of viewing Americans in their cultural setting is witnessing their predilection for viewing and engaging in sport and physical exercise. Interest in sport and exercise in the 20th century has grown enormously among Americans of every age, socio-economic status, and ethnic background. This expression, when viewed in collective fashion, is one which is underscored by the term "ethnic contribution," in perfect accord with our so-called melting-pot, plurality-type society. The seeds from which this luxuriant foliage of physical activity grew were sown largely in 20th century American history. Among the more important of these seedling ingredients folded into the emerging exercise culture of America was the German-American Turnverein experience. Apart from the sports and games movement during the latter part of the period, few developments rivaled those contributions made by Turners to 19th century physical education expression - an expression which demonstrated elaborate organization and intense zeal and discipline, cast in the true spirit of Germanic thoroughness and efficiency, a reflection which, by the way, continues to linger here in late 20th century America.

The philosophy and resulting practices of Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, father of the Turnverein movement in Germany, placed the subject of

SP010 038

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physical exercise in clear focus during German social development in the first half of the 19th century. With a patriotic zealousness reminiscent of later German leaders, of which Adolf Hitler cannot be excluded, Jahn, with the aid of his disciple-like followers, developed a vast network of Turnverein organizations, one of the two most prominent bases for which was a dedication toward raising the physical fitness and responsive discipline of German youth. Stung to the quick by the humiliating Napoleonic invasion of German territories, Jahn sought to rejuvenate the spirit of those Teutonic virtues which he felt formed the very spinal column of Germanic culture. His success in that endeavor, in longitudinal measurement, has contributed a vivid chapter to the social and political history of Western man. Turnvereine spurred the liberal revolution in Germany for much of the 19th century, a revolution aimed at a closer union of the semi-independent German states and, even more importantly, the implementation of constitutional liberty in place of the absolutism of monarchical rule.

The German Turnverein movement in America was one which was often implemented with the same spirit and dedication as had been the order of the day in Germany. The German verb turnen, meaning "to do gymnastic exercises," was the common denominator to all German American Turnvereine. An examination of the constitution of the Sacramento Turnverein, for instance, reveals that gymnastics

participation and instruction to its younger members were of paramount importance among the fundamental purposes of the organization: "The purpose of the society is to further most strongly, through word and deed, the way of the gymnast . . . " (Second Constitution, 1854, p. 1). The form of exercise reflected was a combination of strict "Jahnistic" apparatus work and that type of free exercise expression closely akin to that espoused by Adolf Spiess, father of the free exercise movement in Germany.

THE ROOTS OF THE GERMAN TURNVEREIN EXPERIENCE IN NORTH AMERICA

As early as 1825 the principles of German gymnastics and Turnvater Jahn's Turnplatz had begun to be applied in North America. The groundwork for the German expression of gymnastic exercise was laid initially by that trio of Carlsbad Decree exiles, Karl Follen, Karl Beck, and Franz Lieber, whose collective work at Harvard College, the Round Hill School in Northampton, Massachusetts, and in the city of Boston, respectively, served as a springboard in launching the classical German Turnverein experience in the Western Hemisphere.

The failure of the liberal revolutionary movements of 1848 and 1849 in Germany resulted in thousands of political and social refugees emigrating to the United States in search of new lives. Among the first of those "Forty-Eighters" to arrive in North America

was one Friedrich Hecker, popular hero of a defeated republican uprising in South Germany. By November of 1848 in Cincinnati, Ohio, Hecker had established a temporary home for the first German-American Turnverein. Other Turnverein societies followed in rapid succession, extending geographically from New England, New York and Baltimore on the eastern seaboard, to the growing frontier cities of Milwaukee, St. Louis, Indianapolis, and bustling New Orleans. Even isolated California felt the Turnverein growth impetus of the 1850's, with flourishing organizations forming in San Francisco and Sacramento, and smaller but ambitious "satellite" groups in a number of small mining towns and villages along the Sierra Madre gold-field corridor. By the eve of the Civil War over 150 Turnvereine existed in America, encompassing a membership of between 9,000 and 10,000 individuals of direct German origin (Leonard and Affleck, 1947, p. 295).

Turnverein activity during the post-Civil War period and "Gilded Age" of American history (1865-1900) displayed vigorous growth in terms of increases in membership, new societies, and in the preparation of gymnastics teachers. By the dawn of the 20th century the number of Turners in America, for example, had increased to more than 34,000. This membership was distributed throughout 258 societies that employed 166 teachers of German gymnastics (Leonard and Affleck, p. 310). Stemming from the work of those pioneer teachers of German gymnastics in America, evolved the vigorous efforts of Turners towards having their particular exercise expression accepted as the form of

physical education most desirable for American schoolchildren.

Within the matrix of unrest exhibited by emigrating Germans was a deep-rooted concern for the proper education of their children. Since the Reformation in Northern Europe the subject of education had been one of particular interest and debate among the progressive and industrious Germans. 18th and 19th century developments in the education of young people, including attention to the fostering of physical prowess in gymnastics, had made Germany a leader in the area of educational enlightenment. The education of their young in America continued to be a subject of intense interest to German/Americans and their dedication to the task of developing such a process remained steadfast.

Even though efforts in America regarding governmental legislation for physical education in the schools were slow in following the early 19th century landmark ordinances of Denmark and Sweden, Turner enthusiasm and persistence eventually played an important role in shaping the character of American public school physical education, particularly in the American Midwest where large numbers of German immigrants settled along the length and breadth of the Ohio and Mississippi River valleys. Not withstanding that, however, it was in 1866 in the then fledgling state of California that Turners were first successful in helping to forge legislation aimed at bringing about mandatory physical education in the public schools.

In the years following the 1866 California legislation, Turners

undertook a systematic campaign to acquaint American educators and the public in general with the merits of the German system of exercise expression. A normal school dedicated to preparing teachers of the German system of gymnastics was established in New York City in 1866, after an unsuccessful original attempt in 1860 (Zeigler, p. 32). Later the school was relocated in the cities of Chicago, Milwaukee, Cincinnati, and Indianapolis. Emanating from the various normal school courses a steady stream of gymnastics teachers fanned out into those cities of the American midwest which had significant German/American populations. These teachers, located in such places as Kansas City, Chicago, Rochester, Louisville, St. Louis, Cleveland, Cincinnati, and Dayton, among others, were ultimately successful in instrumenting regular instruction in gymnastics in the public schools of those cities well before the end of the century (Leonard and Affleck, p. 309). The Turnverein influence was felt nationally as well, since their delegates attended annual meetings of the infant (American) Association for the Advancement of Physical Education, outlining in strong terms all aspects of the Turnverein approach.

A distinguished historian of physical education, Dr. Edward M. Hartwell, who lived at a time during the 19th century when the German system of physical education rose to its zenith in America, identified the American Turners as being the most influential force in bringing about the introduction of gymnastic exercises into the public schools (Zucker, 1950, p. 109). No other individual or group did more to

place the subject of physical education before the public's eyes than did the various Turnvereine of the United States. As Turnverein activity enlarged, so did an awareness of gymnastics on the part of lay people, an awareness which in no little way contributed towards support for governmental physical education legislation and personal involvement in physical exercise.

EPILOGUE

The German/Americanturnverein experience continues here in 20th century America, but in abating fashion. On the eve of World War I Turnvereine membership in the United States peaked to over 40,000 people. By 1920 this figure had shrunk to 34,000. The decline in membership continued, in 1940 - 19,000; in 1974 - 15,000. It has been hypothesized (Ueberhorst, p. 53) that the causes for such decline are multiple, among them: (1) a backlash resulting from America's wars with Germany, (2) a waning of true German heritage in the face of the Americanization of German/American offspring, and (3) a spreading or thinning of the German/American population pockets in various sections of America.

But still the heritage has not been lost. National Turner festivals established in the 1850s, continue today. The activities of such festivals have changed greatly, however. Whereas the 19th century bi-annual editions of the festivals involved free and apparatus gymnastics, and singing and dancing contests, the modern quadrennial

Turner festivals feature swimming, track and field, fencing, volleyball, soccer, and basketball, as well as gymnastics. Also, contemporary American Turner festivals are unique, anywhere in the world, for their competitions in "cultural programs"--orchestra, theater, sculpture, ceramics, literature, public speaking, etc.

As we celebrate this Bicentennial era please reflect for just a moment on various aspects of German ethnicity and its contribution to those things which showcase America the world over--agriculture, technology, education, business, the arts, our own field--sport--and, lest any of us forget, the German beers that have made Milwaukee famous.

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